

I have always believed that our nation must honor the commitments and promises it made to our veterans. And the most basic of those commitments is access to quality health care. As the number of veterans from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq taxing an already strained Veterans Affairs health system, it's more important than ever that Congress focus on providing the best care possible to our vets.

### **Bills I have cosponsored during the 111th Congress (2009-2010):**

- [H.R. 2474](#) - Veterans Educational Equity Act - Permits California veterans to use up to the full \$6,586.54 in VA education benefits to offset tuition and fees, similar to the benefits enjoyed by veterans in other states.
- [H.R. 1203](#) - Federal and Military Retiree Health Care Equity Act - Amends the Internal Revenue Code to permit federal civilian and military retirees to pay Federal Employees Health Benefits Program and TRICARE supplemental premiums on a pretax basis. The bill also permits a tax deduction for TRICARE supplemental premiums or enrollment fees.
- [H.R. 816](#) - Military Retirees Health Care Protection Act - Give Congress sole authority to change enrollment fees in TRICARE Prime and TRICARE Reserve Select, pharmacy co-payments, and retiree and survivor co-payments for inpatient care.

### **Key accomplishments during the 111th Congress:**

- The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act ( [H.R. 1](#) ), signed into law in February 2009, provides a payment of \$250 to all disabled veterans receiving benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs. The Recovery Act also provides a \$2,400 tax credit to businesses for hiring unemployed veterans.
- The Recovery Act also included \$1 billion for maintenance work at VA hospitals across the country; \$150 million for an increase in VA claims processing staff; \$50 million to improve the automation of the processing of veterans' benefits; and \$150 million for state grants for the construction of additional extended care facilities for veterans.

### **Key accomplishments during the 110th Congress (2007-2008):**

- The president signed into law in June 2008 the new GI Bill. The legislation (included as an amendment in [H.R. 2642](#)) fully restores full, four-year college scholarships for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, on a par with the educational benefits after World War II.
- In 2007, Congress approved its fiscal year 2008 Military Construction-Veterans' Affairs Appropriations bill ([H.R. 2642](#)), which included the largest increase in veterans' funding in the 77-year history of the VA. Funds were targeted on ensuring that our veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan receive the quality health care that they deserve.
- In 2008, the annual appropriations bill provided another historic increase in veterans' funding, adding another \$4.5 billion over the previous year's funding. Those funds were included in [H.R. 2638](#).
- Other key bills signed in 2008 include the Omnibus Veterans' Mental Health and Other Care Improvements ([S. 2162](#)), the Veterans Substance Abuse Treatment Act ([H.R. 5554](#)), the Rural Veterans Access to Care Act ([H.R. 1527](#)), the Veterans' Construction and Extension Act ([H.R. 6832](#)), and several other pieces of legislation.
- The president also signed two bills during the 110th Congress that increased rates of compensation for veterans with service-connected disabilities and the dependency and indemnity benefits for families of disabled veterans.

### **Fort Ord Veterans Cemetery**

A recent VA report concluded that the most expeditious way to establish a veterans' cemetery at Fort Ord is via the State Cemetery Grants Program, as opposed to the National Cemetery Program. Under the State Cemetery Grants Program, the federal government covers all construction costs, but the state must commit to covering annual operations and maintenance costs. Due to budgetary concerns, California has been reluctant to make this yearly funding commitment. But with public-private partnership language that I was able to include in a VA funding bill, a road map was established for the creation of a Fort Ord State Veterans Cemetery by relieving the State of California of the annual operations and maintenance costs, while providing a new revenue stream that will allow the state to apply to the federal government to start construction.

This partnership is key to making a state cemetery a reality. State-level legislation provides the means for state involvement in this public-private partnership. Now that a plan has been worked

out on how to move forward as soon as possible on a cemetery, members of the Federal, State and local governments along with representatives of the veterans community have come together to move the process forward. At my urging, the Fort Ord Reuse Authority is poised to put up the funding to complete the design and planning of the cemetery.

Veterans on the Central Coast have been waiting a long time for a veterans' cemetery, and with the establishment of this partnership, their dream for the Fort Ord State Veterans Cemetery will be fulfilled.

### **New VA/DOD Clinic for the Central Coast**

Any veteran who has made the trek from our region to the Palo Alto Veterans Hospital can tell you that it's more than just a quick trip to the doctor. Add to this the fact that many veterans also face the additional challenges of being disabled and it is plain to see our area is in dire need of expanded veterans' services. The current clinics in Capitola and at the former Fort Ord are simply not capable of meeting all the needs of our veterans and the military.

The VA and the Department of Defense have signed a Memorandum of Understanding to move forward on the siting and design of a new outpatient clinic. Soon a feasibility study will be conducted to determine the exact size and needs of our region's veterans.

While the former Fort Ord may be disappearing under new homes, schools and shopping centers, the area's veterans and many of its troops are still here. Their needs do not change even if our community does. Too many of our veterans have to drive too far for health care, and making that care available locally is a top priority.

### **Veterans History Project**

The Library of Congress and the American Folklife Center have established an exciting program to honor our nation's war veterans by chronicling the wartime experiences of all those people who served our country during World War I, World War II, and the Korean, Vietnam, and Persian Gulf wars. This is a great program that will allow your memories, accounts, and documents of war to be preserved for future generations.

The Veterans History Project is open to any American wartime veteran, or any civilian that has contributed to a war effort. The program is an excellent way to add your voice to our nation's history and to preserve your stories for future generations. If you would like more information about the Veterans History Project or would like to arrange an interview with one of my staff

members, please feel free to contact my [Santa Cruz district office](#) , or visit the [Veterans' History Project](#) website.

It's important that our Central Coast veterans are represented in this project and I encourage you to contribute your own experiences. I also welcome suggestions and assistance in expanding the reach of this project to as many local veterans as possible. It is an honor to represent you in Congress and I thank you for your service to our nation.

### **Military Academy Nominations**

Each year it is my privilege to nominate exceptional young men and women to our nation's service academies. The opportunity for a quality education and the honor of attending a service academy make these nominations highly competitive. I hope all motivated students living in California's 17th Congressional District will consider these fine opportunities for education and service to our country. Candidates to an academy must reside in California's 17th Congressional District, be a U.S. citizen, and never have been married.

If you are a high school student or know of an interested student, I encourage you to contact my Santa Cruz District Office or visit my website and access the "Helping You" section pertaining to Academies.

### **Congressional Assistance**

If you need assistance or clarification about VA policies, your health care or your compensation claim, please complete a [Constituent Casework Request Form](#) or call either of my district offices to request assistance.

- Salinas 831-424-2229
- Santa Cruz 831-429-1976

